# A Little Look at a Va'ashuv

Today, your standard reference Bible is the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), a diplomatic edition of the Hebrew Bible based on the Leningrad Codex, which variants noted in the lower margins.

Before *BHS*, there was the *Biblia Hebraica Kittel* (BHK), which was very similar, but it had a Hebrew text based on previously printed Hebrew texts -- it was very close to the Leningrad Codex (L), but not identical.

Let us look at two words from Nehemiah 2:15 -- *waʾashub waʾabo* (pronounce it *va-ashuv va-avo*). They mean, "And I returned and I went". This image below is taken from a 1925 edition of *BHK*.
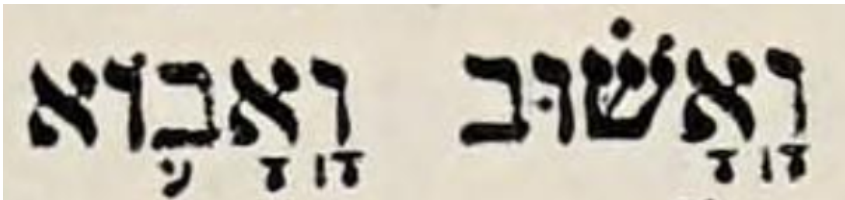

The *waʾashub* begins with a *waw*, and beneath that are a *kamatz* and a *metheg*. Depending on the situation, a *kamatz* can be either pronounced as an *a* or an *o*. The metheg can have several functions, including reminding the reader to pronounce the *kamatz* next to it as an *a*, and reminding the reader not to blend it into the next vowel. That is, you pronounce this *va-ashuv*, not

compressed into a *vashuv*. And finally, it can indicate a sort of secondary stress or almost-stress. In *waʾashuv,* the stress syllable is the *shuv,* but the metheg causes the reader to be careful with the initial *wa-* which makes it sort of a second place stressed syllable.

The thing to remember about a metheg is that methegs are *optional*. They more *remind* the reader about how the word should be pronounced rather than dictate it.

In fact, we can go to a 1951 edition of *BHK* to see just how optional these methegs can be.
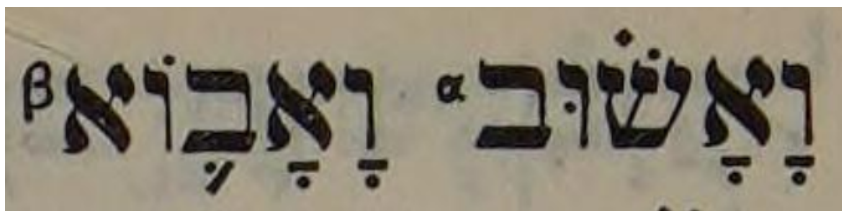
Now if we look at this second example of the same phrase, the metheg on both words have disappeared. This does not change how you should read the words -- you've just lost a little reminder note.

However, two other little notes have now appeared on the page, one after each word. These are two Greek letters, an *alpha* and a *beta*. These indicate footnotes at the bottom of the page, which read as follows.
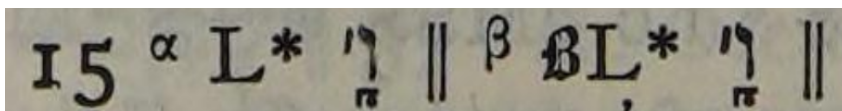
Now, this is some pretty terse abbreviation, and the index of abbreviations in the beginning of *BHK* is in Latin, so here's a quick guide to what's being said.

15 alpha. This note is about what immediately precedes the note *alpha* in verse 15, that is, *waʾashub*.

L asterisk. That is, in the Leningrad Codex, as written by the original hand, *waw kamatz metheg geresh*, that is, the beginning of *waʾashub*, in the *wa-*, there is a metheg.

Similarly, the line *beta gothic B L asterisk waw kamatz metheg geresh*, tells that in the Leningrad Codex and in the Rabbinical Bible of Bomberg the word *waʾabo* has a similar metheg in its own *wa-*.

Did you get all that? If you didn't understand it all, that's understandable. Biblical Hebrew's 22 letters are now accompanied by something like 17 *nekudot* and something like 32 *teammim*, so you've got maybe seventy symbols to keep track of in the Masoretic tradition. And that's *before* Kittel adds in something like a couple of hundred abbreviations in Latin and sometimes Greek to the apparatus of *BHK*.

Imaging you are a forger of Hebrew antiquities, and you are using *BHK* as a guide to pull biblical texts from, which you then attempt to hand-write onto old pieces of leather. Let's go back to the 1951 BHK
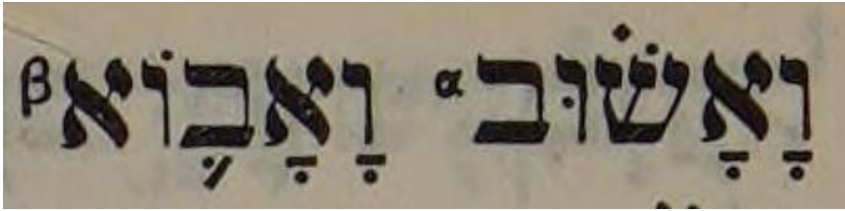
If you are reasonably acquainted with how Hebrew itself works, but not acquainted with the special details of BHK, you will know that a first-century text cannot contain the kamatzes or revia or shin-dot or shuruk dot or holam or tevir that you see here in BHK, so you strip them out.

But suppose you don't know anything about the little *alpha*, and assume it's part of the Hebrew text.

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